

The Fertility of American Women, 1998

Childbearing patterns at the close of the 20th century sharply contrast with the wide swings of the preceding decades.

Hospitals, care providers, insurance companies, and baby food manufacturers all have a healthy interest in the number of newborns. The U.S. Census Bureau uses information on changing childbearing patterns to project the number of people who will be living in the United States in the future. Fertility differences among various population groups, in combination with immigration patterns, set nationwide population trends in motion.¹

A woman in the early 1900s could expect to give birth to about four children during her childbearing years² while a woman living during the Great Depression could expect to have only two. After World War II, the number of births per woman climbed to 3.7 in 1957,

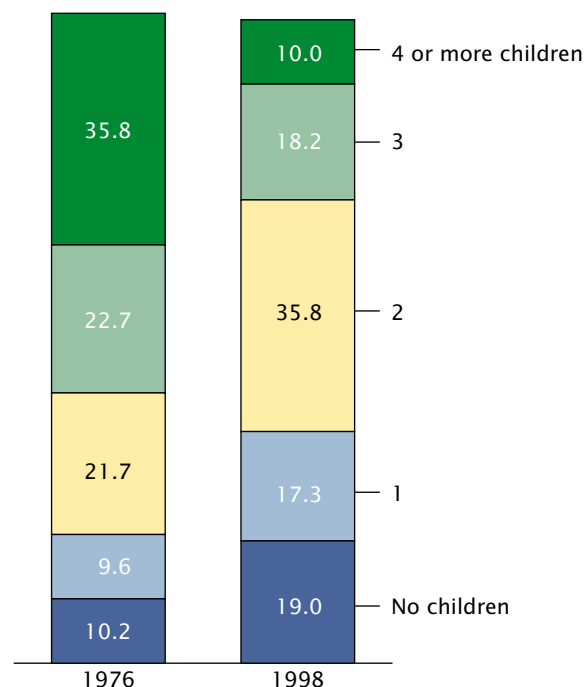
but fell to 1.8 by the mid-1970s. With minor fluctuations, the rate has hovered around 2 births per woman over the last 20 years — a rate below the long-term replacement level.

Women typically have fewer children today than in previous generations, according to the Current Population Survey (CPS). In 1998, only about 10 percent of women ended their childbearing years with four or more children, compared with 36 percent of women in 1976. New mothers in 1998 were also more likely than new mothers in 1976 to work. About 59 percent of mothers with infants (children less than 12 months old) were working or looking for work in 1998, almost twice the share in the labor market in 1976.

Figure 4-1.

Women Aged 40 to 44 by Number of Children Ever Born: 1976 and 1998

(Percent distribution)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Surveys, June 1976 and June 1998.

Words That Count

- **Fertility rate**, in this report, is defined as the number of women who reported having a child in a 12-month period ending in June 1998 per 1,000 women aged 15 to 44. Nearly all women end their childbearing by age 45.
- **Replacement level fertility** is the number of births per woman required to maintain the population — approximately 2.1 births per woman.
- **Children ever born** is the number of children a woman has ever had, not including stillbirths.

¹ See Chapter 2 for the 1999 estimates of the U.S. population and an explanation of how the "components of change" contribute to population growth. Find population projections by race and ethnicity on the U.S. Census Bureau Web site www.census.gov. Click on "P" and select "Projections."

² Childbearing years are generally considered to be aged 15 to 44.

In June 1998, 61 million women aged 15 to 44 lived in the United States. During the preceding 12 months, 3.7 million of these women had a birth, according to the Current Population Survey (CPS). Forty-one percent of these births were first births. The fertility rate for women aged 15 to 44 in the United States was 61 births per 1,000 women.

Childbearing patterns differ greatly among racial and ethnic groups.

Averaging 2.4 births by age 40 to 44, Hispanics were the only group reaching the end of their childbearing years with more births than the number required for natural replacement. Black women and Asian and Pacific Islander women this age had fertility levels that were not significantly different from the replacement level (2.1 births). White non-Hispanic women were significantly below the replacement level, averaging only 1.8 births each.

About 1.1 million women who had a birth in the 12 months preceding the June 1998 CPS were not married.

One in every three births during the 12-month period prior to the June survey occurred to an unmarried mother.³ Out-of-wedlock childbearing occurred predominantly among younger women. Nine out of every ten teenagers giving birth were unmarried. Five in ten births to women in their early twenties were out of wedlock, compared with one in ten to women aged 30 and older.

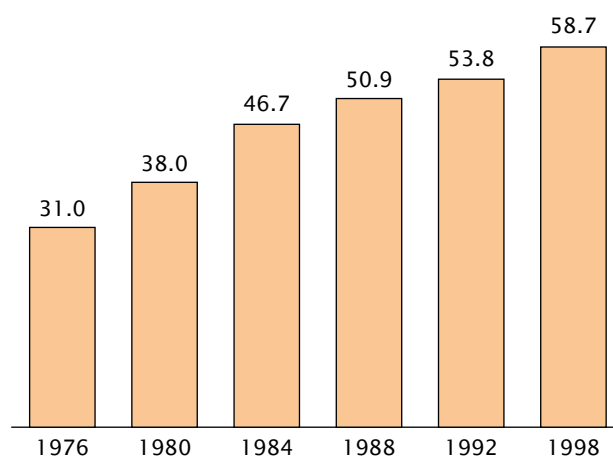
The educational level of the mother was a significant factor in out-of-wedlock childbearing. During the 12 months prior to the 1998 survey, 60 percent of births to women who had not graduated from high school were out of wedlock. In contrast, 26 percent of the births to mothers with some college education and only 3 percent of the births to mothers with at least a bachelor's degree were out of wedlock. In 1976, one-fourth of never-married women aged 40 to 44 had given birth to a child out of wedlock. In 1998, the share was one-third.

³ Unmarried mothers include women who were never married or are divorced or widowed.

Figure 4-2.

Labor Force Participation Rates for Women Who Had a Child in the Last Year: Selected Years, June 1976 to June 1998

(Percent)



Note: After 1990, the numbers are based on women aged 15 to 44, before 1990, the numbers are based on women aged 18 to 44.
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Surveys, June 1976 to 1998.

The Census Bureau Can Tell You More

- For more detailed information, consult the following U.S. Census Bureau Current Population Report: *Fertility of American Women: June 1998* by Amara Bachu and Martin O'Connell.
- Look for complete reports and detailed tables on the Census Bureau's World Wide Web site (www.census.gov). Click on "F" and select "Fertility."
- Contact the Fertility and Family Statistics Branch of the U.S. Census Bureau at 301-457-2449 or e-mail pop@census.gov.
- For information on publications and other resources, see Appendix A.